

NEWS

'Just talk to me,' mom of missing Maine tot begs dad

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TODAY contributor

The mother of a missing toddler pleaded with the father of the child Thursday to contact her after the two have not spoken since their daughter's disappearance nearly two weeks ago.

On TODAY, Trista Reynolds, 23, attempted to reach out to Justin DiPietro, the father of 20-month-old Ayla. The child was reported missing on Dec. 17 after last being seen by DiPietro in his Waterville, Maine, home when he put her to bed the previous night. DiPietro and Reynolds have not spoken once since the child's disappearance or during the ensuing wide-scale search by local authorities.

Reynolds is not considered a suspect by police. She has tried to reach out to DiPietro, but he has not returned her calls, and the police have not acted as any type of intermediary to put the two in contact, she told Matt Lauer.

'Why won't he come out?'

"Just come talk to me," Reynolds responded when asked what she would like to say to DiPietro. "He is the only one who can answer some of my questions. We have a daughter that is missing. We used to be able to get along all the time. Just talk to me. That's all I want. He was the last one to see her alive. Just talk to me."

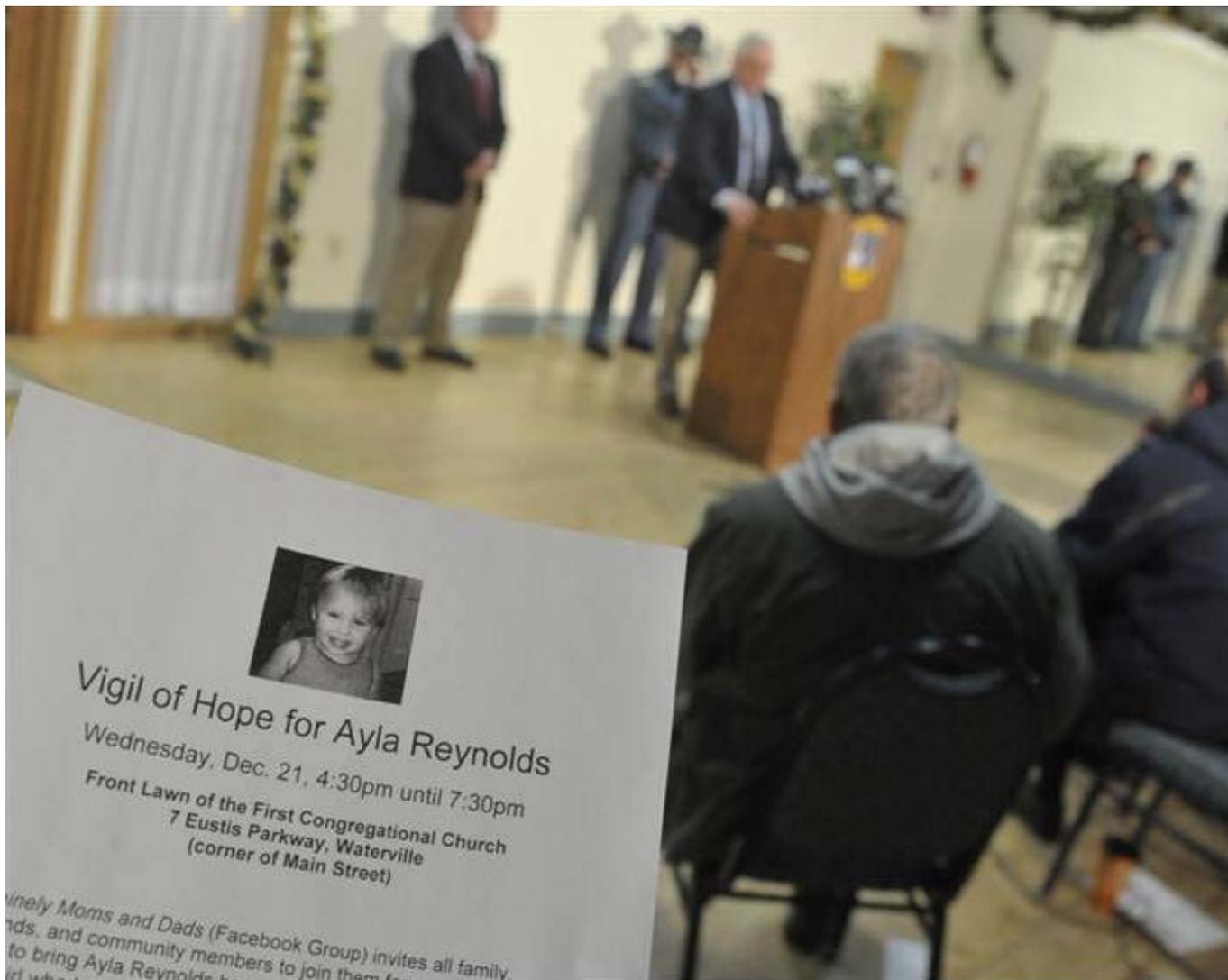
Reynolds is ambivalent about whether she believes DiPietro was involved in Ayla's disappearance.

"I don't know," she said. "Part of me feels yes, and a part of me feels no. He said he's not in hiding, but why won't he come out? Why won't he talk to me? Why is he staying away? What is he so afraid of, to not come out and talk to me?"

On Wednesday, Waterville police said they have wrapped up large-scale searches for the child. With assistance from firefighters and residents, authorities have repeatedly probed private properties, nearby woods, open fields and waterways on foot and by air, according to the Waterville police. They have searched trash bins and drained a stream in an attempt to find the missing toddler. Police concluded that Ayla, who recently started walking, did not leave the house on her own.

A privately funded \$30,000 reward for any information on her disappearance was posted Monday, leading to about 370 tips from as far away as California, according to a statement by police chief Joseph Massey. Authorities have also searched DiPietro's home and dusted for fingerprints. DiPietro

released his second public statement since Ayla's disappearance through the Waterville Police Department on Wednesday.



Michael C. York / FR33873 AP

Waterville police were handing out flyers as chief of police Joseph Massey, at podium, speaks to members of the media regarding the investigation into the disappearance of 20-month-old Ayla Reynolds at a conference at city hall in Waterville, Maine, Tuesday, Dec. 21, 2011. (AP Photo/Michael C. York)

"It is important that the public hear it from me personally that I have no idea what happened to Ayla and that I am not hiding," he said. "I have to believe that Ayla is with somebody and I just want that person to find the courage to do the right thing and find a way to return her safely. Even if that means dropping her off at a church or a hospital or some safe place."

DiPietro has avoided speaking to the media because he does not want to hinder the search, according to his statement.

"I'm still in shock at...what he put out in the statement," Reynolds told Lauer.

'He would never let me see her'

DiPietro told police that he last saw Ayla at 8 p.m. on Dec. 16 when he put her to bed in her polka dot

pajamas that read "Daddy's Little Princess." He reported her missing at approximately 8:50 a.m. on Dec. 17 after she was gone at 8 a.m. when he went to check on her. Ayla, who is just under 3 feet tall and weighs approximately 30 pounds, has blue eyes and blonde hair, and her left arm was in a soft cast from an accident four weeks ago.

Reynolds, who lives 75 miles away in South Portland, was skeptical that the recent injury to Ayla was an accident and had concerns over Ayla's safety under DiPietro's care.

"He would never let me see her," Reynolds said. "I would call to talk to her, and he would get mad about it. If I did see her and I would notice something on her like a bruise or just something, instead of reacting in a calm manner, he would lash out about it or kind of go into defense."



Facebook

This undated photo obtained from a facebook page shows missing toddler Ayla Reynolds. Police in Maine are appealing to the public for help in locating the 20-month-old girl who was last seen Friday night. Waterville Police Chief Joseph Massey held a news conference this afternoon to ask anyone with information about Ayla Reynolds to call police. Ayla's father called police yesterday morning to report that his daughter was not in her bed and couldn't be found. She was last seen sleeping at about 10 p.m. Friday by a family member. (AP Photo/obtained from Facebook)

"I would never do anything to hurt my child," DiPietro said in response to Reynolds's claims. "The questions of Ayla's arm, or bruises, or anything else being said are simply ludicrous."

Reynolds, who lives 75 miles away in South Portland, claimed she and DiPietro had an agreement that he would take care of Ayla when she entered a 10-day rehabilitation program in October for an alcohol issue. Other media reports have suggested that child welfare services removed Ayla from her home and gave her to DiPietro when Reynolds entered the program, which she completed. Reynolds did not see Ayla for the first 2½ weeks after finishing the rehab program, and last saw her child on Nov. 21, she told Lauer.

She disputed reports that she filed for sole custody of Ayla a day before she disappeared, telling Lauer she filed for "parental rights and responsibilities, and that's it." She also denied having anything to do with Ayla going missing.

Police have not told her any more than they have told the public about the search. The authorities have been "exceedingly cautious" about releasing details to the public in order to not jeopardize the investigation, according to Massey's statement. In his statement, DiPietro thanked the police and community for their efforts and for putting up a reward for Ayla's return.

"It's the same thing — that they're still investigating, that they're still where we were 13 days ago," Reynolds said.

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